# WRITTEN STATEMENT

# BY

# THE WELSH GOVERNMENT

|  |  |
| --- | --- |
| **TITLE** | **Strategic Approach to Welsh Fisheries and Aquaculture** |
| **DATE** | **04 December 2024** |
| **BY** | **Huw Irranca-Davies MS, Deputy First Minister and Cabinet Secretary for Climate Change and Rural Affairs** |

Members of the Senedd will wish to be aware I am setting out the Welsh Government’s priorities for Fisheries and Aquaculture for the rest of the Senedd term. These priorities have been developed with the [Ministerial Advisory Group for Welsh Fisheries](https://www.gov.wales/ministerial-advisory-group-welsh-fisheries) (MAGWF), who have played a key role in shaping this Strategic Approach and I am grateful for their input. After considering their advice I want to set a clear direction for fisheries and aquaculture to achieve a stable and secure future for both sectors in Wales.

Following our exit from the EU and the Common Fisheries Policy, the Fisheries Act 2020 came into effect to create a UK framework for the management of our fisheries and aquaculture. Our work is now framed by this Act’s [Fisheries Objectives](https://www.legislation.gov.uk/ukpga/2020/22/section/1/enacted) and in November 2022 we published, with the other UK Fisheries Policy Authorities, a [Joint Fisheries Statement](https://www.gov.wales/joint-fisheries-statement-0) (JFS) setting out our policies for delivering those Objectives. This includes an ambitious programme of Fisheries Management Plans (FMPs) to be delivered to ensure the sustainable management of sea fish stocks. These will be a key focus for us going forward.

The Welsh Ministers must exercise functions relating to fisheries, fishing, and aquaculture in accordance with the policies contained in the JFS. It will be important we use our resources wisely to achieve the best outcomes alongside wider Welsh Government priorities, including tackling the nature and climate emergencies, and the need to continue to deliver a range of statutory fisheries duties.

Our priorities for the remainder of the Senedd term will be to deliver our **statutory fisheries duties** including day-to-day fisheries management, control and enforcement, and monitoring alongside meeting our **national and** **international obligations** as a Fisheries Policy Authority and to publish and implement the **FMPs** set out in the JFS**.** I will elaborate on these priorities in the remainder of this Statement and want to be clear, our focus will be on these things going forward for the rest of this Senedd term.

**Statutory duties** - We have a range of statutory commitments we will continue to deliver as a priority. In addition to our day-to-day role of licensing, managing and permitting fisheries, we will continue to monitor fishing activity and inspect fishing vessels both at sea and in port, taking an intelligence led approach to enforcement action.

Our [Inshore Vessel Monitoring System](https://www.gov.wales/inshore-vessel-monitoring-systems) is providing new insight about where and when fishing activity takes place. Alongside this, we are also improving other Control and Enforcement systems which will enable us to more effectively manage our fisheries. As we develop FMPs, we will explore the use of other technologies such as Remote Electronic Monitoring, to further safeguard stocks and the environment to ensure sustainability. In addition, a [digital permitting system](https://www.gov.wales/apply-fishing-permit) has been implemented to improve efficiency and make it easier for fishers to obtain permits, for example to gather intertidal cockle, and make catch returns. Over 5000 catch returns have been submitted through the new digital system, showing a marked increase in the volume and timeliness of returns compared to previous years.

In line with the [UK Workplan for fisheries data collection](https://assets.publishing.service.gov.uk/government/uploads/system/uploads/attachment_data/file/1165316/UK_WorkPlan_2023.pdf), the Whelk Fishing Permit (Wales) Order 2021, the Cockle Fishing Management and Permitting (Wales) Order 2024, regional byelaws and the Fisheries Act 2020, we will continue to collect and analyse the best available evidence on key fish stocks of interest to Wales. The evidence collected will help to inform adaptive fisheries management, the development of FMPs, and ensure we are acting collaboratively and contributing to wider international knowledge.

**Fisheries Management Plans** - FMPs will provide road maps for the future management of stocks to maintain, and where necessary restore, them to sustainable levels, whilst supporting a thriving fishing industry and a healthy marine environment. To meet the challenge of delivering the programme of FMPs, the Fisheries Division has already redirected resources to this priority work. Joint [FMPs for Bass and King Scallop](https://www.gov.wales/joint-fisheries-statement-and-fisheries-management-plans#135882) in English and Welsh waters were published in December last year. We are working collaboratively with stakeholders, through existing and new structures, to prioritise actions and implement the plans, applying lessons learnt from our successful whelk management system. Advisory groups for bass and king scallop are well established and I look forward to hearing about plans for next stages of implementation to bring the benefits of FMPs to life.

In addition, we are also developing a Wales Crab and Lobster FMP and pre-consultation sessions have been held with stakeholders. We will be looking to publish the plan in 2026.

My officials are also contributing to shared stock FMPs including the two Irish Sea plans and two Celtic Sea plans for both pelagic and demersal stocks.

In recognition of the importance of intertidal cockle fisheries, we have introduced the [new cockle management order](https://www.gov.wales/cockle-fishing-management-and-permitting-specified-area-wales-order-2024-html) this year, which paves the way for other measures and a Wales Cockle FMP in 2028. Finally, a Whelk FMP will also be brought forward. As part of this FMP, we will look at what refinements we may be able to make to this adaptively managed fishery based on the evidence base we are building through this permitted fishery.

FMPs will be evidence hungry and therefore their development and implementation will be intrinsically linked to science and evidence. Developing more adaptive management systems for our fisheries will require the best available scientific evidence and will ensure management decisions can be responsive to changes in stock abundance and the environment. Through the implementation of FMPs, as the evidence base builds for each species, we will develop systems to assess their maximum sustainable yield (MSY) or a proxy where these are not currently available.

**National and International obligations -** Given the nature of the marine environment, not only working collaboratively within the UK on research, management and enforcement, we of course look further afield, and we will continue to ensure Wales is represented in relevant international fisheries fora, such as the Regional Fisheries Management Organisations, as well as playing our part in the UK delegation during annual fisheries negotiations with the European Commission. We will engage in the Specialised Fisheries Committee under the Trade and Co-operation Agreement (TCA) to maximise benefits and outcomes for Wales. Looking ahead to 2026, and the review of the TCA sharing arrangements with the EU, we will pursue the maintenance of a suitable and beneficial range of fishing opportunities, particularly in relation to non-quota stocks, to allow the Welsh fleet to develop.

In relation to the allocation of additional quota, we will continue to learn lessons and develop our approach going forward.

It is clear climate change is having an impact on the distribution of stocks and, in line with the JFS and through FMPs, we will be looking to adapt and respond to these changes. With the increase of Bluefin Tuna in our waters, I am pleased we have been able to introduce a [recreational fishery](https://www.gov.wales/bluefin-tuna-catch-and-release-recreational-fishery) this year. We will manage this iconic species in line with our international obligations, having built on learning from CHART Cymru and THUNNUS Wales. It is important we take a precautionary approach which will maximise the potential social and economic benefit of the species. Alongside this we will continue to work with the rest of the UK to further improve management of this and other species under the auspices of ICCAT (International Commission for the Conservation of Atlantic Tunas).

I now want to acknowledge several areas of importance which sit alongside and support the delivery of our priorities.

I recognise the importance of our aquaculture sector and the benefits it brings, not just providing a low carbon, high-quality protein food source, which can support future food security, but also for a range of other purposes and delivering high skilled jobs. Aquaculture is not the focus of any FMPs, however, we will continue to support industry led sustainable growth in line with the high-level steer set out in the JFS, our ongoing work and support for the sector via the [Welsh National Marine Plan](https://www.gov.wales/marine-planning-0) (WNMP), the Seafood cluster and the [Welsh Marine and Fisheries Scheme](https://www.gov.wales/welsh-marine-fisheries-scheme) (WMFS).

The WNMP identifies aquaculture as having significant potential for sustainable growth. Welsh Government is committed to developing further evidence through our marine planning system to improve understanding of the opportunities for the aquaculture sector. We have already commenced work to map areas of resource with potential to support aquaculture activity, together with developing our understanding of environmental sensitivities and socio-economic considerations within these areas. My officials will continue to develop understanding of potential opportunities for future aquaculture activity and will consider how best to safeguard such areas and support sustainable development of the plan area through the marine planning system.

I have heard the calls for the development of a new Pacific Oyster policy. At present, applications to farm Pacific Oysters (POs) are assessed on a case-by-case basis by the relevant competent authority. This is an area coming into greater focus across the UK with changes in markets making oyster production a more appealing option for shellfish producers while our changing environment alters the risk associated with these projects in some areas. I have asked officials to continue to monitor the situation and as the evidence base evolves will revisit the need for any specific further policy regarding the use of POs in aquaculture.

Where possible we will continue to support the seafood supply chain and promote Welsh seafood as a sustainable and healthy choice to the consumer. Export markets continue to be vital to the viability of the seafood sector. To ensure businesses are getting appropriate specialist trade support I have asked officials in Food Division to embed seafood into their core activities as they do with other food produced in Wales. The full range of support and interventions provided through Food Division to food and drink manufacturing will also support the seafood industry.

Alongside the development of this Strategic Approach, officials have been fully engaged with stakeholders in the development of a road map for the Welsh seafood supply chain. The output of this work is set to be a tangible and achievable plan for the seafood supply chain. Supported by Seafish, and inspired by the Welsh Fishermen’s Association, the aim is for all areas of the seafood sector businesses, research, government and representative bodies alike to work in collaboration to build a resilient supply chain. I look forward to seeing the final outcomes from the work, which are due to be published before the end of the year.

For our freshwater and migratory fisheries, the plight of wild Atlantic salmon and sea trout is very alarming. It is clear with fisheries management measures already in place across Wales, wider action is needed to restore salmon populations and increase climate resilience. Healthy salmon populations require healthy rivers. Cleaning, protecting, and enhancing our water environment is a priority of this government. The Programme for Government commits us to improving water quality by beginning to designate inland waters for recreation and strengthening river water quality monitoring. We have committed to provide over £40 million of additional funding between 2022-23 and 2024-25 to address water quality challenges across Wales, including over £1.5 million of funding for nutrient management boards, which were established to address Special Area of Conservation (SAC) river catchments. Natural Resources Wales (NRW) are responsible for the management of salmon, sea trout and other freshwater and migratory species in Wales, and we will continue to work closely with colleagues in NRW.

The decline in wild Atlantic salmon is not just an issue here in Wales, as such we will continue to address key issues at the UK level and internationally, through the North Atlantic Salmon Conservation Organisation (NASCO). In 2025 Cardiff will play host to the 42nd annual meeting of NASCO, we look forward to welcoming Governments from across the north Atlantic and the wider international Atlantic salmon community to Wales.

We cannot deliver any of our plans without stakeholder involvement. We have a clear future vision for the industry to play a greater role in managing fisheries. We will develop a definition of co-management and a framework for delivery to help us achieve the vision. As a precursor to this, we will continue to work collaboratively with MAGWF, the [Wales Whelk Advisory Group](https://www.gov.wales/wales-whelk-advisory-group) (WWAG) and additional stakeholder advisory groups set up to assist in the implementation of FMPs. These groups will play an important role, as part of an effective and robust decision-making approach and will be key for early participation of stakeholders during policy development and a co-management approach. We will listen to views and experiences of stakeholders and use appropriate and innovative techniques to ensure we engage in the right way with the right people.

We will continue to provide support to the fisheries and aquaculture sectors, in addition to the priorities I have set out. The WMFS is designed to create opportunities within the marine environment, coastal communities and sustainable seafood across the whole supply chain, from production to processing and marketing. The scheme can and will adapt to our needs, so we have a clear framework in place to respond to priorities over time.

The WMFS stakeholder advisory group is in place to ensure co-production of the scheme which will support investment and contribute to the WNMP, the Well-being of Future Generations (Wales) Act as well as the principles and specific commitments in the Programme for Government, along with commitments made in the JFS and FMPs. I encourage all eligible stakeholders to make use of the funding available via the WMFS – to seek opportunities for growth, diversification and innovation, to help drive the priorities and use the scheme to build a more prosperous, fairer and greener Wales.

This Strategic Approach reflects the calls from the fisheries and aquaculture sector to have clarity for the future. The wellbeing of those involved in the fisheries and aquaculture sectors is of the upmost importance. I am committed to doing what we can in these areas and will explore further with MAGWF and within Welsh Government.

This Strategic Approach is about getting the fundamentals right, and directing our delivery priorities, ensuring we have a strong base of sustainable fisheries and aquaculture management to take us into the years ahead. I want us to be in the best place to tackle challenges, with robust management tools, sound evidence, and a sector supported by the WMFS to be flexible and able to respond to pressures and opportunities, securing a positive future for the Welsh fisheries and aquaculture sectors.